

WHAT IS IT THAT WE KNOW WHEN WE KNOW

Every philosopher worth his salt must address with his students the question of what it is that we know when we know; for on the answer hangs the efficacy, indeed, the very worth of all their studies. The theory of knowledge is tied to the study of reality—epistemology to philosophy—for there is a necessary proportion between the known and the knower, between thing and the thinker. In the attached extract from his life of St Thomas Aquinas, Chesterton has outlined the philosopher’s teaching on the topic admirably, building on his explication of St Thomas’s teaching on *being* reproduced in a previous article.¹

The knowing mind is not merely receptive, nor merely creative; yet it is active, embracing (in the objective concept) the thing in its formality. As has been remarked in Professor Solomon’s *Lessons in Philosophy* on this website when we know a tree what we get into our heads is not the tree’s matter. What we assimilate is its *form* the tree’s most important constitutive, for without the form the matter would not be that of a tree. To know is *habere aliquid in se formaliter et non materialiter*² : when we know we assimilate the *form* of the thing.

Chesterton does something more here. He isolates the causes of the two aberrations of the age, subjectivism and materialism. Subjectivism shuns the liberty of reality and the land of the living; shuns the object in favour of introspection. Materialism reduces the mind to a mere receptor rejecting its active, its creative, impulse in the act of knowing; it conceives man as wholly subservient to his environment.

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Extract from Chesterton’s *St Thomas Aquinas*, 1933; chapter viii, ‘The Sequel to St Thomas’

The *strangeness* of things, which is the light of all poetry, and indeed in all art, is really connected with their otherness, or what is called their objectivity. What is subjective must be stale; it is exactly what is objective that is in this imaginative manner strange. In this the great contemplative is the complete contrary of that false contemplative, the mystic who looks only into his own soul, the selfish artist who shrinks from the world and lives only in his own mind. According to St Thomas, the mind acts freely of itself, but its freedom exactly consists in finding a way out to liberty and the light of day; to reality and the land of the living. In the subjectivist, the pressure of the world forces the imagination inwards. In the Thomist, the energy of the mind forces the imagination outwards, but because the images it seeks are real things. All their romance and glamour, so to speak, lie in the fact that they are real things; things *not* to be found by staring inwards at the mind. The flower is a vision because it is not only a vision. Or, if you will, it is a vision because it is not a dream. This is for the poet the strangeness of stones and trees and solid things; they are strange because they are solid. I am putting it first in the poetical manner, and indeed it needs much more technical subtlety to

¹ http://www.superflumina.org/PDF_files/chesterton-on-st-thomas.pdf

² *In Librum de Causis*, Lect. 18 & cf. http://www.superflumina.org/PDF_files/knowledge.pdf

put it in the philosophical manner. According to Aquinas, the object becomes a part of the mind; nay, according to Aquinas, the mind actually becomes the object. But, as one commentator acutely puts it, it only becomes the object and does not create the object.

In other words, the object *is* an object; it can and does exist outside the mind, or in the absence of the mind. And *therefore* it enlarges the mind of which it becomes a part. The mind conquers a new province like an emperor; but only because the mind has answered the bell like a servant. The mind has opened the doors and windows, because it is the natural activity of what is inside the house to find out what is outside the house. If the mind is sufficient to itself, it is insufficient for itself. For this feeding upon fact *is* itself; as an organ it has an object which is objective; this eating of the strange strong meat of reality.

Note how this view avoids both pitfalls; the alternative abysses of impotence. The mind is not merely receptive, in the sense that it absorbs sensations like so much blotting-paper; on that sort of softness has been based all that cowardly materialism, which conceives man as wholly servile to his environment. On the other hand, the mind is not purely creative, in the sense that it paints pictures on the windows and then mistakes them for a landscape outside. But the mind is active, and its activity consists in following, so far as the will chooses to follow, the light outside that does really shine upon real landscapes. That is what gives the indefinably virile and even adventurous quality to this view of life; as compared with that which holds that material influences pour in upon an utterly helpless mind, or that which holds that psychological influences pour out and create an entirely baseless phantasmagoria. In other words, the essence of the Thomist common sense is that two agencies are at work; reality and the recognition of reality; and their meeting is a sort of marriage. Indeed it is very truly a marriage, because it is fruitful; the only philosophy now in the world that really is fruitful. It produces practical results, precisely because it is the combination of an adventurous mind and a strange fact. M. Maritain has used an admirable metaphor, in his book *Theonas*, when he says that the external fact *fertilises* the internal intelligence, as the bee fertilises the flower. Anyhow, upon that marriage, or whatever it may be called, the whole system of St Thomas is founded; God made Man so that he was capable of coming in contact with reality; and those whom God hath joined, let no man put asunder.

Now it is worthy of remark that [Thomism] is the only working philosophy. Of nearly all other philosophies it is strictly true that their followers work in spite of them; or do not work at all. No sceptics work skeptically; no fatalists work fatalistically; all without exception work on the principle that it is possible to assume what it is not possible to believe. No materialist who thinks his mind was made up for him, by mud and blood and heredity, has any hesitation about treating it as objective.

Therefore [St Thomas's] work has a constructive quality absent from almost all cosmic systems after him. For he is already building a house, while the newer speculators are still at the stage of testing the rungs of a ladder, demonstrating the hopeless softness of the unbaked bricks, chemically analyzing the spirit in the spirit-level, and generally quarrelling about whether they can even make the tools that will make the house. Aquinas is whole intellectual aeons ahead of them, over and above the common chronological sense of saying a man is in advance of his age; he is ages in advance of our age. For he has thrown a bridge across the abyss of the first doubt, and found reality beyond and begun to build on it. Most modern philosophies are not philosophy but philosophical doubt; that is, doubt about whether there can be any philosophy. If we accept St Thomas's fundamental act or argument in the

acceptance of reality, the further deductions from it will be equally real; they will be things and not words. Unlike Kant and most of the Hegelians, he has a faith that is not merely a doubt about doubt. It is not merely what is commonly called a faith about faith; it is a faith about fact. From this point we can go forward, and deduce and develop and decide, like a man planning a city and sitting in a judgement-seat. But never since that time has any thinking man of that eminence thought that there is any real evidence for anything, not even the evidence of his senses, that was strong enough to bear the weight of a definite deduction.
